

Sammy Davis Jr. piqued FBI's curiosity

WASHINGTON — Before his death in 1990, Sammy Davis Jr. had a large and loyal following of fans who knew him as a great entertainer and humanitarian. But perhaps the most unusual "groupie" of the singer/dancer/comedian was J. Edgar Hoover, whose Davis collection was short on songs and long on personal and political gossip.

The FBI kept a meticulous record of Davis' political benefit appearances and financial donations. Judging from the bulk of entries made in Davis' FBI file between 1957 and 1972, he wore the bureau's scarlet letter of potential subversive.

For example, on Oct. 15, 1967, Davis attracted bureau attention for his opening remarks at a benefit performance for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when he was quoted in his file as stating that "all races must learn to live together in a peaceful manner."

The FBI showed a keen interest in tracking everything from Davis' "black nationalist" activities to his dating of white women to his utterances about the Vietnam War.

We obtained Davis' files under the Freedom of Information Act. Large portions were blacked out on privacy grounds, while another large chunk was removed following a 1977 federal court order that placed the deleted notations under the custody of the National Security Archives until the year 2027.

These entries describe conversations between Davis and Martin Luther King Jr., which were obtained by the FBI during a six-year wire-tapping operation of King's residences, hotel rooms and the offices of the Southern Christian

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Leadership Conference.

Enough can be pieced together to show that many of the conversations between Davis and King centered on requests for Davis to organize and participate in celebrity benefits for the SCLC. The FBI saw it another way: Davis' humanitarian efforts were perceived as a collaboration of an influential figure with an organization believed to be influenced and infiltrated by known communists.

Davis never got tagged as an actual communist. Rather he was pinpointed for "questionable activities."

The fact that the FBI kept a secret file on Davis puts him in the company of other celebrities such as Lucille Ball, James Cagney, Carey Grant and Rock Hudson. Hoover believed that "there was something addicting about a secret." Based on the range of secret files he maintained, Hoover was nothing short of a junkie in his appetite for political and personal gossip.

FBI files reviewed by our reporter Mike Sharon also show an interest in Davis' personal affairs. One series of entries relate to his 1960 marriage to white actress May Britt, an event that topped off public controversy.

Following the tabloids' lead, Hoover made a personal entry into the Davis file noting that CBS asked Davis to participate in a special program titled "Social Problems of

Our Time," but subsequently withdrew the invitation citing Davis' "questionable morals."

With Davis the object of such intense interest, the bureau curiously displayed little interest when genuine threats were made on his life. The FBI was intrigued by a press report in the early '60s stating that Davis had been kidnapped years earlier by Chicago gangsters who threatened him with serious bodily harm should he continue his relationship with white actress Kim Novak. However, the bureau soft-pedaled the story — even tossing out the theory that it was invented as "an attempt by Davis to obtain publicity."

Included in some of the 311 references to Davis in FBI files are these:

- "Newark letter, dated 2/24/64, made references to Milwaukee letter to bureau dated 1/31/64, with lead to Newark to ascertain whether Sammy Davis Jr. had been in contact with Martin Luther King."

- "The following references in the main file on Robert F. Kennedy ... contain information of a critical nature concerning the friendly relationship that existed between Mr. Kennedy and Sammy Davis Jr. ... Regarding a musical entertainment show wherein Mr. Kennedy was interviewed by Sammy Davis."

- "... in connection with the Rally for Freedom in Support of the Birmingham, Ala., movement which was held on 5/26/63 ... under the sponsorship of the NAACP ... Sammy Davis Jr. made an announcement concerning the offering that was taken. Davis was reported to have pledged \$20,000, which was said to represent one week's earnings in Las Vegas, Nev."